

Gazette Opinion: Unhealthy lobby blocks reforms

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On major health care reforms, the first session of the 110th Congress should be remembered as the year of missed opportunities.

The majority of Americans believe that all U.S. children should have ready access to needed health care. A bipartisan majority of Congress, two-thirds of the U.S. Senate and nearly two-thirds of the House supported reauthorizing and covering more kids with the State Children's Health Insurance Program. Yet President Bush and some House Republicans were able to block any expansion. The week before Christmas, Congress agreed on and President Bush said he would sign a budget that extends SCHIP at previous funding levels till March 31, 2009.

The state-run CHIP programs may be able to keep serving the 6 million children they now cover. But there's no hope for covering more uninsured children while Washington remains so politically gridlocked that not even the plight of poor, sick tots can inspire a veto override.

Medicare for insurers

Plans for improving Medicare for elderly and disabled Americans fared little better. Also in the pre-Christmas compromise written by Max Baucus, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and ranking GOP member Charles Grassley was a six-month fix for a scheduled reduction in the rates Medicare pays doctors. The doctor payment rate would have been cut by 10 percent on Jan. 1 had Congress not acted on a compromise that President Bush is willing to sign. A compromise was necessary because the a rate cut would result in more doctors limiting the number of Medicare patients they see. However, the six-month extension means that this rate issue will have to be addressed again in the presidential campaign year.

Baucus' SCHIP and Medicare proposals were tougher to sell because they aimed to pay for increased program costs, instead of simply adding them to the national debt as most legislation has done in recent years. The Senate SCHIP bill would have paid for most of the cost increase with higher tobacco taxes. To offset doctors' fees and boost aid to low-income seniors, Baucus looked hard at reducing what Medicare pays insurance companies that sell Medicare Advantage plans. Some of these plans offer more services to enrollees than traditional Medicare; some offer no additional benefits. The government pays more to all these private plans than it does for enrollees in traditional Medicare, thus making the "overpayments" a target for Medicare reformers. Alas, tobacco and insurance lobbyists won. President Bush, armed with his veto pen, stood on their side.

Work for next year

Baucus bowed to political realities in the last days of the session. He didn't get the health-care legislation that would best serve children, elders and taxpayers. He got what was politically possible in a year when moving good, new ideas forward proved politically impossible.

The conclusion of this session leaves much work for next year when the election countdown will make progress no easier.

Last week, Baucus outlined an ambitious agenda for 2008, including broad Medicare reform and children's health legislation. He has recognized the value of controlling costs by putting a greater emphasis on quality, cost-effective care.

As chair of the committee responsible for Medicare, Medicaid and taxation legislation, Baucus needs to stay focused on the big picture: Making quality health care accessible and affordable to all Americans.